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ABSTRACT

Film historians have tended to overlook the industrial film even though it has been widely used as a sales tool since early in this century. The Caterpillar Tractor Company was one of the first to adopt this medium as a means of demonstrating what its machines could do in a variety of situations. While other types of films have been made by Caterpillar over the years, including safety, public interest, and training films, all have become part of the firm's marketing effort. Most of these films, comprising a library of almost 400 titles, still exist in the company's archives. Together they document the use of film by a large corporation. Filmmaking at Caterpillar can be divided into four periods. Little footage from the early years up to 1928 has survived, but there is enough to show that these films dealt primarily with equipment demonstration. Over 100 films were produced between 1929 and 1941; some introduced new equipment and its applications while others either presented ideas on how to do a job or developed the corporate image. Few films were made during World War II, but two that were produced in 1942 are of historic interest. They document the building of the AlCan Highway and the Can-Al pipeline. Some 260 films have been produced since the war, mostly concept films, equipment demonstrations, and industrial travelogues. Some of the best are safety related and employ professional stunt men in well-staged accidents in an attempt to instruct machine operators in correct operating techniques. (RBW)

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A HISTORY OF THE CATERPILLAR TRACTOR COMPANY'S USE OF MOTION PICTURES

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A HISTORY OF THE CATERPILLAR TRACTOR COMPANY'S USE OF MOTION PICTURES

While the term film history is generally applied to the history of theatrical films, this is misleading for it implies that these are the only films with a history. Some of the development of non-theatrical films has been treated separately in studies of specialized types of films, such as MacCann's study of government films, The People's Film,[1] and Mercer's The Information Film.[2] The industrial film, however, remains the stepchild of film history, with Gipson's 1947 overview of industrial film use, Films in Business and Industry,[3] being the major book in the field. This is not without some irony since Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory, first shown in March 1895, may quite properly be called the first industrial film,[4] as well as one of the first films ever made. Although the concept of films being produced and used by industries is often associated with the great proliferation of corporate audio-visual departments after World War II, their use had grown concurrently with the development of the theatrical film. An article published in 1913 indicates this early use by industry:

> It is widely known how motion pictures are used in the lecture room and before scientific and trade associations to give realistic representations of methods and operations carried on in manufacturing plants and in connection with general engineering work, even for advertising purposes. Not so well known is the fact that motion pictures are employed in even more vital contact with commerce and that they give promise of speedily becoming a most important accessory in selling various tools, appliances and machinery.[5]

This article suggests that not only were motion pictures becoming more popular in industry, but that a number of companies had been using them for some time.

One of these was the Holt Company, which merged with the Best Company in 1925 to form the Caterpillar Tractor Company. Holt's committment to movies began early: through the years new formats and technologies were being adopted soon after their commercial introduction, demonstrating a constant interest in the medium. A study

of these films offers a historic profile of the use of film by a large company.

A major factor in the early decision to use film was the kind of product being marketed. Both Best and Holt began manufacturing giant combine harvesters in California in the 1880's. They improved these by adding steam power and later brought out the crawler tractor. Their equipment has always been very large and expensive. Prospective customers naturally wanted to see it in action before they made such a substantial investment. Live demonstrations were the best selling methods, but weather and transportation were only some of the limiting factors on these. Film, however, could record not only a single demonstration but could show the machine working in a variety of situations. By 1913, Holt sales offices were equipped with Edison projectors and had a library of films about their machines for customers to see.[6]

While the initial use of film may have been partially because of its novelty, the continued use of the medium indicates that it was an effective selling tool. Over the years, dealers have reported selling pieces of equipment on the basis of a film alone.[7] Although other kinds of films have been made--safety, public interest, training--, these all became part of the marketing effort. Caterpillar salesmen strive to maintain an on-going relationship with their customers. By providing the customer and his employees with film programs on safety, operating procedures, maintenance information and new techniques applicable to this work, the salesman helps the owner and continues the relationship between the times of major purchases.[8] From its early introduction to the present, film has been an important link in selling Caterpillar equipment.

Fortunately for scholars, the company has an archive which contains copies of films going back to the 1920's. While the early films were shot on 35mm nitrate, Caterpillar began distributing prints in 16mm soon after that format was introduced in 1923. These nitrate originals and 16mm copies were all stored in a brick film

vault at the Peoria headquarters. The collection grew over the years as the original of each film was saved. It is not clear that there was an official policy on this preservation, but unofficially, the film people were reluctant to throw any of the old footage away. As the nitrate began to deteriorate, the potential for fire increased. Plant fire inspectors complained about the dangerous situation, but since the vault was located outside the factory, they had no authority to get rid of the nitrate.

In 1965, Don Peterson, the in-house film producer, presented the company with a proposal requesting funds to transfer as much of the nitrate as possible to 16mm. Peterson was aware of the film's historical value and of its potential entertainment value in future films. The money was approved, and Edwin Railsback was assigned to clean out the vault. He picked out all of the film that seemed to be in usable condition. This was further inspected for quality by an editor from Calvin Communications. Only film in good condition was to be transferred; there was no attempt at restoration of damaged footage. The transfer was done by Movie Lab in New York, and the result was over 10,000 feet of 16mm film, now in the archives in Peoria.[9]

Based on this library of almost 400 films, plus film lists going back into the 1920's, filmmaking at Caterpillar can be divided into four chronological periods. First were the early years from 1900 to 1928, the productive time from 1929 to World War II, the War years, and the post-war period to the present.

The Early Years

The earliest years could be called the Pre-history period because most of these films no longer exist in their original form. Only one, General Pershing in the Big Bend, was included in the 1965 transfer. It is assumed that the rest deteriorated before then. However, sepia-toned clips copied earlier from the nitrate were used in

two Caterpillar films: Born in the West(1949) and The Big Track(1954). Of great interest are the shots of Holt's first steam combine in action. The narration in The Big Track dates this film at 1896, when the combine was introduced, but Don Peterson feels that the film was probably made a few years later. The clips show the combine in long and medium shots as it moves by the camera. Sometime after the introduction of the crawler tractor in 1904, Holt began making films of it, possibly to augment their international sales campaign which began in 1910, the year after the company moved to Peoria. By 1913, Holt had produced a sizable collection of films for prospective customers. Iron Age reports that in the Holt offices one could see on film:

> . . .where the tractors are made, how they are tested before shipment, how they cross a wide ditch, ascent steep grades and go down others, how trees are pulled down and tree stumps removed on the site, for example, of the Ashokan reservoir, how the engines travel over sandy and marshy ground and also pull from 12 to 18 plows and do other agricultural work. A series of films showing logging operations in Michigan are now being made.[10]

Although these short films dealt primarily with equipment demonstration, company image was being developed by showing the manufacture and testing of the machines. A dramatic opportunity afforded itself in 1917 when Caterpillar cinematographers were able to show their crawlers pulling supply trains for General Pershing in his campaign against Pancho Villa. The shots of the supply trains snaking their way up the rocky terrain of the Big Bend country of Texas are very impressive.

These few clips and the magazine article suggest that a variety of films were produced in these early years, principally to demonstrate product performance.

1929-1941

In these early years there was apparently enough business to prompt the Wylie, Wells, Kelly Film Lab of Oakland, California, to follow Holt east and establish a Peoria branch. Wylie did most of the lab work for Caterpillar. In 1929, four years after the merger and the establishment of Caterpillar headquarters there, Orville Snyder arrived in Peoria from the west coast plant and seems to have been responsible

for a flurry of films. During his five years in Peoria, he trained Fred Jolly to operate the camera and put films together. Jolly in turn trained another local worker, Paul Prutsman to assist him after Snyder left. Between the three of them, over 100 pictures were produced from 1929 to 1941. In 1932, the first sound film was made and 55 more were produced after that, frequently with matching silent versions. The track was usually newsreel-type narration with music to open and close. The music was generally lively, but one film, Blizzard Insurance (1937), has oddly funereal organ music throughout which contrasts with the snow plow being energetically demonstrated. In 1939, Bank to Bank became Caterpillar's first color film. After the war, color was used for almost all films.

The films of this time were mainly marketing. Some introduced new equipment and its applications. Let's Go Diesel(1937) briskly moves the viewer through 19 different uses of the stationary diesel engine in 11 states of the union in less than 15 minutes. In addition to its versality, this engine, according to the announcer, "Has the appetite of a pigmy and the power of a giant." Dealers reported selling a new type Motor Grader with a 100 foot film demonstrating its road building uses in 1938.[11]

Other films went beyond the simple demonstration to present ideas or concepts on how to do a job. From the Woods to the Mill (1929) is an industrial documentary illustrating the whole logging process from the building of the railroad to the sawing of the boards. The role of the Caterpillar tractor is shown in its overall context.

Another type of concept film was aimed at the general public and municipal governments. These presented ideas that would benefit the public, like building and and maintaining roads for automobiles. With this lay audience in mind, the title cards or narration tend to be more dramatic. The Snow Bogy(1929), which featured an animated snow monster, argued the point that plowed roads in the winter were becoming a necessity. After the initial drama of the Bogy, which "even impedes the doctor

while isolated mothers pray," the film gets down to logical facts and figures. Auto Patrol(1936) stresses the need for keeping the roads in good condition by showing cars bouncing over potholes while the narrator notes, "Motorists cling to steering wheels and pray." This film also offers an interesting social note. An operator of the Auto Patrol, an early name for the motor grader, is shown wearing a white shirt and tie as he drives the machine. According to Caterpillar filmmakers, this was not unusual in the 1930's since operating this impressive piece of equipment was considered to be a prestigious, if dusty, job.

The remaining films made during this time developed the corporate image. A Recruiting film, Our Plant and Its People (1939) and two quality control films--Building Performance (1934) and Behind the Scenes with Quality (1939)--show the Peoria factory. An interesting new kind of image film was the industrial travelogue. With titles like The Far Cornors (1940) and World's Work (1939), these films showed Caterpillar equipment at work on jobs all over the world, from the Far North to Africa and New Zealand. Besides showing some exotic scenery, these movies implied Caterpillar's dominance in the world market, creating an image of international superiority.

A side note on a piece of footage labeled "Miscellaneous." Because Caterpillar films reflect Peoria standards of propriety and a no nonsense approach to product sales, bathing beauties and cheesecake shots do not appear in them. However, someone from Peoria did make the trip to Chicago long enough to document "Sally Rand at the 1933 World's Fair." Although it is unlikely that this was ever used in any official company film, the nitrate original lived long enough to make the transfer to 16mm in 1965.

This period between the two wars saw the introduction of sound and color as well as the development of film aimed at the general public, the industrial documentary and the industrial travelogue.

World War II

Comparitively few films were made during the war years, probably because there were no new products and little need for marketing films when 86% of Caterpillar's

output went to the military.[12] Further, the shortage of manpower may have cut down on the personnel available for this work. There are nine existing films which show Caterpillar machinery at work in the war. These films seem aimed primarily at Caterpillar employees to show how their product was helping to win the war. The early ones like The Road to Tokyo(1942), showing the building of the AlCan Highway, and Twin Roads to Victory (1942), which simply adds the building of the Can-Al pipeline to the previous film, both have the marks of Caterpillar films. Later films, however, seem to be made from military footage, which has been edited to emphasize the role of the machinery. Our Fighters (1942) is clearly a cut and paste job and not a very good one. The fact that films were produced at all during this time supports the thesis that the company was committed to film as a medium of communication.

Post-War to Present

Predictably, film activity increased tremendously after World War II, and about 260 films have been produced since then, most by the in-house unit and some by Calvin Communication. Concept films, equipment demonstrations and industrial travelogues still make up the bulk, but they are more sophisticated, reflecting current trends in visual style and message presentation.

Some of the concept films are for owners and operators, presenting new industrial techniques or explaining the services available at Caterpillar dealers. There has been considerable emphasis on using Caterpillar parts, along with the maintenance and repair programs offered by the dealerships. There are also a number of slick propaganda films aimed at the general public in the guise of public information films. Some of the early ones, like The Perfect Crime (1954), were blatant in their emotional message. This film accuses the public of road deaths because they have not voted to improve the highway system. It concluded with the warning, "Protest diversion of highway funds or share the guilt of murder if you don't." Later films on ecology

waste disposal, energy and road building are most subtle and purport to be objective, although their recommended solutions always involve the use of Caterpillar equipment. Their 27-28 minute length suggests that they are made with television airings in mind, as well as showings at schools and service clubs.

Equipment films continue to be important in marketing. Completely new designs, like the auger scraper which features a new way of loading the scraper bowl, and the D-10, a tractor so large that transportation problems make it unfeasible for dealers to have it on the lot, are recent examples of machines that necessitated films as part of their marketing campaign.

The industrial travelogues have now become impressive public relations pieces, illustrating Caterpillar's involvement in projects all over the world for the benefits of mankind, especially in under-developed countries. Monuments(1977) contrasts monuments of the past like the pyramids of Egypt to what it calls the monuments of today--dams and other large construction projects. While monuments of the past were for the selfish aggrandizement of one person, according to the narration, today's monuments are to better the living conditions of many. While this film is obstensibly about this concern for advancing the conditions of the poor, especially in Third-world countries, Caterpillar equipment appears in many shots. Visually interesting, the film is a reasonably low-keyed piece of inspirational propaganda. Like most of the big P. R. films, this was made by Calvin, with assistance from the in-house unit, and its length indicates that television was a hoped-for outlet.

Finally, there are the safety films which are some of the best in the industry. Produced by Calvin in cooperation with Don Peterson and others in the in-house unit, using professional stunt men, these films are both instructive and enterta ning. The big yellow machines are dramatic in themselves, as Sam Peckinpah showed in Junior Bonner, and the well-staged accidents are exciting and realistic. Peterson, who was instrumental in shaping these films, notes the changes over the years. Early films like The Gamblers (1954) showed the steps leading up to the accident, but

the consequences are generally left to the viewer's imagination. Peterson feels that this technique will no longer hold the attention of viewers accustomed to television chases and violence. Consequently, the accidents now happen on-screen, complete with technicolor blood. A recent film, The X Factor(1979), shows a man actually being run over by his tractor in a cleverly designed stunt.

Management is ambivalent about these films. On one hand, they dislike the implications that their equipment can hurt or kill people; on the other hand, they find the films useful evidence in court cases to prove that the company has encouraged safety and tried to educate the machine operators in the correct operating techniques. Dealers report that these safety films are the most popular in their loan library, which attests to their high quality and entertainment value.

In all of this activity, the historical footage is not lying idle in the archives. It has been used in a series called "Operator Tips" as a means of catching the viewers' interest and calling attention to the changes that have been made in equipment over the years. This has proved to be very successful because it adds both a light touch and a sense of history to the training films.

Beginning around the turn of the century, this company saw the value of motion pictures to sell their product. Over the years, they have incorporated improvements in style and technique and broadened the uses of the medium. Although video tape is used extensively in training mechanics, film continues to be the medium for marketing, safety, public relations and presenting new concepts.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Richard MacCann, The People's Film: A Political History of U.S. Government Motion Pictures (New York: Hastings House, 1973).

[2]John Mercer, The Informational Film (Champaign, Il.: Stripes Publishing Company, 1981).

[3]Henry Bipson, Films in Business and Industry (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1947).

[4]Erik Barnouw, Documentary (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974)), p. 29.

[5]"Growing Use of Commercial Motion Pictures," Iron Age, April 10, 1913, p. 886.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Gipson, p. 46. Also The Dealer, Jan. 1964, pp. 8-9.

[8]Interview Wilburn Smith, Caterpillar salesman, Dallas, Texas, April 22, 1981.

[9]Interviews with Don Peterson and Edwin Railsback, Caterpillar Tractor Company, Peoria, Il., June 25-28, 1979.

[10]"Growing Use", p. 886.

[11]Gipson, p. 46.

[12]Fifty Years on Tracks (Peoria: Caterpillar Tractor Co., 1954.), p. 51.